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Reagan remark on Carter CIA draws fiery response

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan was sharply criticized yesterday by former President Jimmy Carter, Walter F. Mondale, a former CIA director and Democratic members of Congress, for appearing to shift the blame for last week's bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut to the intelligence policies of the Carter administration.

Reagan, meanwhile, said that his remarks Wednesday at a campaign stop in Bowling Green, Ohio, had been "distorted" by the press. White House spokesman Larry Speakes said Reagan had not blamed the Carter administration for the lack of warning about the suicide bombing.

The controversy was touched off when Reagan, in response to a question about security at U.S. embassies, talked of the need for improved in-

telligence to guard against attacks. He cited the "near destruction of our intelligence capability in recent years — before we came here," and added that "we're trying to rebuild our intelligence to where you'll find out and know in advance what the target might be and be prepared for it."

Carter issued a statement out of his Atlanta office calling Reagan's statement false and "personally insulting."

Mondale, the Democratic presidential nominee, termed Reagan's remarks "inexcusable" and said the President "should stand up and say he is responsible."

"By saying the CIA is weak, he encourages terrorists and our enemies around the world to believe that we don't have an effective intelligence capacity when we do," said Mondale.

Stansfield Turner, CIA director un-

der Carter, said Reagan's remarks were "some of the most undignified, unworthy comments from a president I've ever seen. It's unfair for any president three and a half years into office to try to cast blame on his predecessor. He's had plenty of time to do whatever he wants to do with the intelligence apparatus."

Turner said that the CIA budget, which is classified, doubled during the Carter administration, and he charged that Reagan was "desperately trying to justify his failures in the midst of an election campaign."

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Edward P. Boland (D., Mass.) issued a statement characterizing Reagan's remarks as "unfair and untrue" and said intelligence gathering about terrorist activities received "higher and higher priorities" throughout the Carter years.

Reagan made a brief reference to the politically sensitive dispute yesterday at a picture-taking session in the White House Rose Garden. He said, "I will answer your questions about the way you have distorted my remarks about the CIA," but he did not elaborate.

Later, Speakes told reporters that Reagan's remark Wednesday was intended to emphasize the need for more "human intelligence" capabilities, as opposed to electronic intelligence gathering.

Speakes said Reagan was "talking about human intelligence-gathering capability, not dollars, but the emphasis of where the dollars that are in the CIA are put."

The White House explanations came after Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D., N.Y.) had released a March 8 letter from CIA Director William J. Casey in which Casey said that a beefing up of the CIA took

place during the last two years of the Carter administration. Carter was president between January 1977 and January 1981.

"All of us know that the increase in the personnel and budgetary strength of the agency began in 1979, that it was planned and proposed earlier, and that it cannot be completed without strong bipartisan support," Casey wrote. "I fully share your conviction that the vital functioning of this agency cannot be risked or impaired through any use of CIA for partisan political purposes."

Casey's letter to Moynihan, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, was in response to Moynihan's criticism of a statement by Speakes last December that the CIA had been "crippled" during the Carter administration.

Part of the latest controversy concerning Reagan's remark revolves around personnel cuts made in 1977 during the first year of the Carter administration by Turner.

Turner said he eliminated 820 positions at the CIA then in response to recommendations made by agency professionals during the Ford administration. He said that the cuts were made in the context of reducing staffing levels that had been bloated during the Vietnam War and that they affected "bureaucratic overhead in Washington" and not "intelligence operations overseas."

The staff reductions — coming shortly after the CIA had been under attack in Congress for drug experimentation and other highly publicized incidents — were known to cause morale problems at the agency among longtime personnel who also complained of Turner's abrasive style.